

Last week I joined several of my colleagues in sending a letter to President Obama requesting clarification of his criteria for the lethal use of drones overseas. Administration officials assure us that a "high degree of confidence" is required that the person targeted by a drone is a terrorist. However, press reports have suggested that mere "patterns of behavior" and other vague criteria are actually being used to decide who to target in a drone strike. I am concerned that an already troublingly low threshold for execution on foreign soil may be even lower than we imagined.

The use of drones overseas may have become so convenient, operated as they are from a great distance, that far more "collateral damage" has become acceptable. Collateral damage is a polite way of saying killing innocent civilians. Is the ease of drone use a slippery slope to disregard for justice, and if so what might that mean for us as they become more widely used on American soil against American citizens?

This dramatic increase in the use of drones and the lowered threshold for their use to kill foreigners has tremendous implications for our national security. At home, some claim the use of drones reduces risk to American service members. But this can be true only in the most shortsighted sense. Internationally the expanded use of drones is wildly unpopular and in fact creates more enemies than it eliminates.

Earlier this month a former top terrorism official at the CIA warned that President Barack Obama's expanded use of drones may actually be creating terrorist "safe havens." Robert Grenier, who headed the CIA's counter-terrorism center from 2004 to 2006, told a British newspaper that, "[the drone program] needs to be targeted much more finely. We have been seduced by them and the unintended consequences of our actions are going to outweigh the intended consequences."

After a drone strike in Yemen last month once again killed more civilians than suspected al-Qaeda members, a Yemeni lawyer sent a message to President Obama stating "Dear Obama, when a U.S. drone missile kills a child in Yemen, the father will go to war with you, guaranteed. Nothing to do with Al Qaeda." These are the unseen victims of the president's expanded use of drones, but we should pay attention and we should ask ourselves how we would feel if the tables were turned and a foreign power was killing innocent American children from thousands of miles away. Would we not feel the same?

The expanded use of drones overseas has been matched with the expanded use of drones in the United States, which should alarm every American who values the Constitution and its protections against government interference in our private lives. Recently, the governor of Virginia welcomed the expanded use of drones in his state because they "make law enforcement more productive." I find that attitude chilling and am sure I am not alone.

Do we want to live in a country where our government constantly flies aircraft overhead to make sure we are not doing anything it disapproves of? Already the Environmental Protection Agency uses drone surveillance to spy on farmers and ranchers to see if they are in compliance with regulations. Local law enforcement agencies are eyeing drone use with great anticipation. Do we really want to live under the watchful eye of "Big Brother"? It is terrifying enough to see how drones are being misused abroad. We must curtail the government's ability use drones right away lest the massacres in Yemen and Pakistan turn out to be crude training exercises for what the administration has in mind on our own soil.